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The Patterns and Purposes of Localized Teacher Professional Development Programs

Issues Brief #1 under EQUIP1's Study of School-based Teacher Inservice Programs and Clustering of Schools



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Background and Context for Change

Recent efforts to improve educational quality in many countries have focused on improving teacher quality (e.g., ADEA 2002, 2004; Craig et al. 1998; Prouty 2000; Tatto 2000). But what is teacher quality? How do we recognize and define it? And, most importantly, how are the conditions created that encourage teacher quality to grow?

This paper reviews an important aspect of quality of teachers and teaching and presents a perspective on why inservice teacher professional development programs that take place primarily at the local level—in schools and clusters of schools—are increasingly favored and implemented by governments in the North and the South. The argument is made that the changing structure and location of many inservice programs is driven by two fundamental paradigm shifts within the education sector: (i) the shift in approaches to both student and teacher learning from passive to active learning, and (ii) the shift to more decentralized forms of authority, activity, and agency.

Several elements have come together in recent years that have created the environment for change and led to a greater awareness of the critical importance effective and motivated teachers. They include

- Widespread curriculum reforms that emphasize active learning,
- Accompanying necessity of rapid and effective teacher change,
- Growing realization of the central role of teacher quality in educational quality,
- Career-long ongoing teacher professional development increasingly viewed as a necessity to improve teacher quality and therefore educational quality,
- Rapid expansion of student enrollments requiring much larger numbers of teachers and the necessity of finding ways to prepare and support relatively inexperienced or “unqualified” teachers,
- Declining quality as a consequence of rapidly expanding quantity of education in the absence of sufficient resources, and
- Consequent necessity that governments and donors to invest in increased teacher quality.

Within this context, policy makers in education are searching for ways to ensure that teachers (i) understand the meaning of reforms; (ii) know the (often new) subject matter they teach; (iii) engage students in a range of appropriate new learning experiences; and (iv) work with increased professionalism and high morale.

School-based and Cluster Professional Development

In response to this challenge, many countries are turning to ongoing localized school and cluster-based inservice programs as the primary means of professional support for teachers (e.g., Chesterfield and Rubio 1997; Craig et al. 1998; Engels 2001; Gidey 2001; LeCzel 2004; O’Grady 2000). These teacher inservice programs follow a wide variety of patterns such as groups of teachers working together to improve their practice at single schools, teachers working together in clusters of several (or many) schools, or combinations of the two. Frequency of meetings varies widely. In some programs teachers meet only a few times a year. In others teachers meet weekly. Localized programs often exist side-by-side with traditional centralized inservice programs that often focus on upgrading of qualifications, while localized programs focus on updating with new information and skills.

Programs conducted at the school or cluster level are usually highly practical and participatory. Facilitation is most frequently carried out by the teachers themselves, with the support of materials or modules that combine information on new approaches with suggestions for reflection and action. The content of programs is often based on experience sharing among teachers combined with core content based on a country's curriculum reform program and required new approaches to teaching and learning. Programs are supported by a variety of teacher-learning materials and facilitation guidelines including printed materials, radio support, multimedia kits, and sometimes Internet-based programs. Programs are most frequently organized and supported by district offices working together with colleges of teacher education and local supervisors.

School-based and cluster inservice programs tend to be very popular with teachers who are accustomed to receiving little professional attention and working in isolation. Teachers welcome information on how to understand and implement reforms for which they have no practical preparation and no available models. Teachers react positively to the opportunity to learn and to the regard for their professional worth that such programs signal.

Active Learning for Teachers

The shift towards school-based and cluster approaches is fundamentally related to shifts that have taken place over the last two decades in the way we think about student learning and teacher learning. The following matrices and text will help to illustrate this. The tables compare general trends in previous and present thinking and approaches to student learning (Table 1) and teacher learning (Table 2) in countries of the North and the South.

Table 1

Student learning	
Previous trends/approaches	Present trends/approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Passive learning▪ Rote memorization▪ Teacher centered▪ Positivist base	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Active learning▪ Use of higher-order thinking skills▪ Student centered▪ Constructivist base

Table 2

Teacher learning	
Previous trends/approaches	Present trends/approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Goal is teachers who are competent in following rigid and prescribed classroom routines▪ Teachers are “trained” to follow patterns▪ Passive learning model▪ Cascade model—large centralized workshops for a few teachers, usually with little school-level follow-up▪ “Expert” driven▪ Little inclusion of “teacher knowledge” and realities of classrooms▪ Little emphasis on teachers’ knowledge of and responsiveness to student needs▪ Positivist base	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Goal is teachers who are reflective practitioners who can make informed professional choices▪ Teachers are “educated” or “prepared” to be empowered professionals▪ Active and participatory learning model▪ School-based model in which all teachers participate▪ Teacher facilitated (with support materials)▪ Central importance of “teacher knowledge” and realities of classrooms▪ Emphasis on teachers’ knowledge of and responsiveness to student needs▪ Constructivist base

As the tables above illustrate, approaches to teacher learning have changed in ways that are similar to the changed approaches to student learning. Previously the primary goal was to produce teachers who were competent in carrying out prescribed classroom procedures and in “transmitting” or “delivering” knowledge to students. The knowledge base of teacher learning was often defined and delivered in large-scale workshops by teacher training “experts” with minimal inclusion of teachers’ own knowledge and experiences of their school and classroom realities.

National policies for curriculum and instruction and subsequent teacher learning goals have changed in most countries, although practice tends to change slowly. Teachers are now encouraged to be reflective practitioners, with sufficient subject-matter knowledge and a grasp of a range of practical approaches so that they can make informed professional choices. Although such a transformation does not happen overnight, programs work in the direction of preparing teachers to be empowered professionals. In teaching, as in any other profession, this is achieved not through a passive model of teacher “training” but through an active and participatory model of teacher learning (Darling-Hammond 1995; duPlessis et al. 2002; Government of Ethiopia 1994; Lieberman 1995).

Decentralization and Teacher Learning

The shift towards school-based and cluster approaches is also related to recent trends towards decentralization in countries of the South, that have devolved authority and responsibility to local entities. The tables below compare previous centralized and present decentralized trends in the governance and organization of schools (Table 3) and in the governance and organization of teacher professional development programs (Table 4).

Table 3

Governance and organization of schools and classrooms	
Previous approaches	Present approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Centralized decision-making▪ Authoritarian school environment and classrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ More decentralized/local decision-making▪ More participatory/democratic school environment and classrooms

Table 4

Governance and organization of teacher professional development programs	
Previous approaches	Present approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Centralized▪ More authoritarian, based on hierarchies within districts and schools▪ Preservice emphasized in program and budget allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Decentralized at the district/school level▪ More participatory, encouraging increased school autonomy, accountability, community involvement, and “communities of learning” among teachers and school leaders▪ Continuum of professional development/ inservice emphasized, some shift of budget toward inservice

The governance and organization of teacher professional development programs have undergone shifts that parallel both the devolution of authority to the school level in general and the changes described above in approaches to teacher learning. Inservice teacher development, relying previously on more centralized cascade workshops, is increasingly shifting to programs that are more decentralized, either at the district or school levels (Engels 2001). Decentralized teacher professional development is less authoritarian and more participatory, emphasizing responsibility and accountability at the school level and attempting to generate a community of learning at the school level that interacts in an inclusive manner with the surrounding community.

Accompanying this trend, the previous overwhelming use of budgets to support preservice teacher education at the expense of inservice is now being reconsidered. Governments are increasingly conceptualizing teacher development as a career-long continuum with attention and resources now spread in a more balanced way along this continuum between preservice and inservice programs.

Questions for the Future

Despite the rapid growth of school- and cluster-based teacher inservice programs in developing countries and their popularity among teachers, there are many outstanding questions about their organization, content, effectiveness, cost, and sustainability. Information is scarce on these issues and what we know is promising but sometimes anecdotal. In future programs, more attention should be paid to the following issues:

- What changes and improvements do we see in the classrooms of teachers who participate in school-based and cluster inservice programs?
- What do we know about the effects of these programs on teacher professionalism and morale?
- What is the effect of changed practice on desired student characteristics such as academic learning, skills, and attitudes?
- How can we understand and compare the costs and benefits of localized teacher development, which is designed to include all teachers and principals, with more centralized forms of teacher inservice which includes only a few who are meant to multiply their new knowledge within their schools?

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